

18
THE DESIGN OF THE GOSPEL HISTORY
CONSIDERED AND IMPROVED,

IN A
S E R M O N.

PREACHED AT THE
CHAPEL IN ESSEX-STREET, STRAND,
LONDON,

M A Y 11;

AND AT
CHOWBENT, IN LANCASHIRE,

ON
M A Y 25, 1788.

By JOSHUA TOULMIN, A.M.

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S E R M O N, &c.

JOHN xx. 31.

*But these are written, that ye might believe that
Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and, that
believing, ye might have life through his
name.*

WE are apt, sometimes, to wish, that
the history of the life of Christ had
been more full and comprehensive: that it
had conducted us through some scenes of his
ministry, of which it is silent; that it had
given us more of the remarkable and weighty
sayings which dropt from his lips; that it had
recorded some of his discourses of which it
affords only an hint, such as his conversation
with the disciples going to Emmaus; that it
had filled up, what now appear blank and
void spaces in the narrative; and that it had
related more of those great works which he

performed. We may be ready to think, that had our wishes, in these respects, been answered, not only curiosity would have been agreeably indulged, but many important instructions would have been conveyed to us, and stronger impressions of the wisdom and power of our divine master would have been left upon our hearts.

But however pleasing, or even useful, in our conceptions, it would have been to have been furnished with more large and more particular memoirs of the life of Christ, the providence of God hath ordered it otherwise. There were, it is evident, very ample materials to have filled volumes on this entertaining and edifying subject. But it is as evident, that the evangelists did not mean to say every thing that they could have said about the works and instructions of Christ. They selected only such discourses, and facts, as more particularly struck their minds, or were adapted to the particular ends of their respective writings, or occurred to their memory with circumstances which gave them peculiar force. The main part of the life, and even of the ministry, of their master they have passed over in silence.

One grand and leading design governed each of them, and they have taken care to record and perpetuate a sufficient number of the instructions and actions of Christ to answer that purpose. They wrote not for the amusement, but for the salvation of mankind.

They

They wrote not to set off their master's character with all possible lustre and pomp, but to exhibit it without art or flattery, and to place it in such a point of view as would command an attention to its excellence and produce a conviction of its divine authority; while they waved throwing upon their picture all the light it was in their power to give it.

The evangelist *John*, in the text and preceding verse, and in ch. xxi. 25, hath well expressed their design and accounted for their conduct; while he hath also intimated the great compass of the subject which he treated.

“ And there are many other things which
 “ Jesus did; and many other signs truly did
 “ Jesus in the presence of his disciples, which
 “ are not written in this book; the which, if
 “ they should be written every one, I suppose
 “ that even the world itself could not
 “ contain the books that should be written :”
 i. e. “ the size of the volumes would necessarily prevent the generality of mankind from procuring or reading them *.” “ But these
 “ are written, that ye might believe, that
 “ Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and,
 “ that believing, ye might have life through
 “ his name.”

Thus, though curiosity be not gratified, a more valuable end is sufficiently provided for. Though not half of the wonderful deeds, and admirable words of Christ, are

* See Doddridge in loc.

told us, yet enough hath been said to convince us of his divine character, and to secure the great end of faith in his mission. They who will not receive him, as their master and saviour, upon the evidence of the records with which we are furnished, would not be persuaded, though the detail of his miracles and teaching had been more particular; or the history of them had extended through many volumes. They who are satisfied with the evidence, which this concise history lays before them, have no need of a fuller and larger work, either to produce faith in their minds, or to lead them to the great end of faith, the salvation of their souls. "These are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and, that believing, ye might have life through his name." The evangelist here expresseth the end proposed by his writings—and the great benefit which this end would secure to those, with respect to whom it was obtained. The end which the historian had in view, was to convince men that Jesus was the Messiah:—and the benefit arising from this conviction to those who should feel it, would be life through his name. I would now discourse on each point: some useful and important reflexions will offer themselves from the discussion of both.

I. The end for which the evangelist John wrote his gospel:—it was to convince his readers, that Jesus was the Messiah. "These

“ are written, that ye might believe, that
 “ Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and,
 “ that believing, ye might have life through
 “ his name.” As the words are immediately
 connected with an account of the appearances
 of Christ after his resurrection, and of the
 evidences which he afforded to his disciples of
 his being alive again, some would limit the
 text, not only to the gospel of John, but
 even to that particular part of it, in which
 the signs that Jesus did in the presence of his
 disciples, for that special purpose, are related.
 But the words are full as just and pertinent a
 conclusion to the four gospels, and to that of
 John in particular, as to this peculiar narra-
 tive. Under this extensive application would
 I consider them, as referring to the signs and
 miracles wrought by Christ before, as well as
 after, his resurrection; and as descriptive of
 the design of the other evangelists, as well as
 that of John.

The four gospels set before us the temper
 and deportment of Jesus of Nazareth on a
 variety of occasions, and through different
 scenes of his public ministry. They relate
 his conversations with his friends, his remon-
 strances with his enemies, and his sermons to
 the people. They record his decisions on
 nice questions, his answers to intricate cases
 which were referred to his judgment, his
 excellent sayings and remarks on particular
 occurrences, and his various striking and per-
 tinent parables. They also record numerous
 miracles,

miracles, which he wrought, with all the circumstances of time, place and persons, that can authenticate a narrative. They, particularly, give a full account of his last sufferings, of his resurrection from the dead, and of his subsequent appearances to his disciples. These are the contents of these concise, but valuable, histories.

The evident tendency and design of all is, to produce in the mind of the reader, a conviction of the divine authority of him, whose memoirs they give us. There is not an action, there is scarcely an incident, which they relate, but is connected with this end: and, in some degree or other, contributes to it. John expresseth this end by saying, "these were written, that ye might believe that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God."

The terms, *Christ*, and *Son of God*, were words very familiar to the Jews, and of the meaning of which there was, in that age, no dispute or doubt. It appears from the gospels, that they both signified the *Messiah*. Thus Andrew and Philip express themselves: (*John* i. 41. 45.) "We have found the *Messiah*, which is, being interpreted, the *Christ*." "Philip saith to Nathanael, we have found him of whom Moses in the law and the prophets did write, Jesus of Nazareth the Son of Joseph." The same thing appears from the discourse of our Lord with Martha: (*ch.* xi. 27.) "Whosoever believeth in me shall never die. Believest thou this? She saith

“ faith unto him, yea, Lord, I believe that
 “ thou art the *Messiah*, the *Son of God*, which
 “ should come into the world.” This answer shows, what it is to believe in Jesus Christ, so as to have eternal life, viz. to believe that he is the *Christ*, the *Son of God*, whose coming was foretold by the prophets.

From these passages it is plain, that the word *Christ*, is the same as *Messiah*: the former indeed is the Greek, the latter the Hebrew, term for anointed; i. e. the person sent and destined to support that high and sacred character which had been, from the beginning of the world, the subject of prophecy and the expectation of ages. The great question among the Jews was, whether Jesus of Nazareth was the *Messiah*. That he was so, was the great truth, which he himself took pains to establish. This, it appears, from the perusal of the *Acts*, was the chief subject of the apostles’ preaching. This was the point, which the writings of the evangelists were designed to elucidate and confirm.

Those authors did not mean to amaze the world with the exploits of an hero; nor to entertain it with the history of a fine artist; nor to conduct the reader through the disquisitions of a subtle philosopher: but to leave on the mind a serious and saving conviction of the divine authority of Jesus of Nazareth. If they repeat to us his discourses and sermons, their view is to convince us, that his

doctrine was not "his own, but the Father's
 "who sent him." If they relate the deeds
 of power and benevolence which he performed,
 it is to prove by his actions, that "God
 "was with him." If they record the scenes
 of his life, sufferings, and resurrection, it is
 that by comparing these with the words of
 prophecy, we may be convinced that this was
 the person, of whom Moses and the prophets
 did speak. From every part of their history
 the same conclusion ariseth; that he, of whom
 they wrote, was a teacher come from God:
 nay, that he was the prophet whom Moses
 said, God would raise up to them of their
 brethren like unto himself. For this was
 their object, their highest ambition, to preach
 not themselves, but *Christ Jesus the Lord*; or
 that *Jesus* was *Christ* and *Lord*.

II. I am to consider the benefit which would
 result from a conviction of this truth; viz.
 eternal life: "that, believing, ye might have
 life through his name." This was the im-
 portant blessing, which our Lord himself
 proposed, as the happy effect of believing in
 him. (Ch. vi. 47. 40.) "Verily, verily, I say
 "unto you, he that believeth on me hath
 "EVERLASTING LIFE. This is the will of
 "him that sent me, that every one which
 "seeth the Son, and believeth on him, may
 "have EVERLASTING LIFE." Our saviour
 speaketh of this as the first object of divine
 benevolence in his mission: (Ch. iii. 16.)
 "God so loved the world, that he gave his
 "only

“ only begotten Son, that whosoever believ-
 “ eth on him should not perish, but have
 “ EVERLASTING LIFE.” If therefore the
 gospel historians endeavoured to persuade and
 convince, it was not merely with a view to
 establish their own credit, or even to secure
 the honour due to their divine master;—but
 to carry a point of the utmost consequence
 to their readers, namely *their* EVERLASTING
 HAPPINESS. “ That, believing, ye might
 “ have life through his name.”

The attention of the evangelists to this end,
 evinceth both the greatness of their views
 and the benevolence of their minds: the
 noblest object, we see, occupied their thoughts,
 and the greatest happiness of others animated
 their labours and governed their pens. The
 faith, which could instruct and authorise
 them to propose so sublime and heavenly an
 hope, was, in this respect, far more excellent
 than any religion then subsisting in the
 world.

The expectations of a future state, which
 the systems of paganism produced, were, at
 best, obscure and uncertain. Moses, in the
 institution of the jewish religion, if we re-
 gard only the explicit sanctions of the law,
 promised nothing superior to the advantages
 of this life; a fruitful country, plenty, victory
 over enemies, a long life, vigorous old age,
 and the hope of a surviving posterity*. It

* H. Grotius de Veritate Religionis Christianæ, l.ii. § 9.

is characteristic of *that* Covenant, of which Christ is the mediator, that it is a "better" covenant, founded on better promises: "even the promise of "an inheritance, incorruptible, undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven." The hero of history, the philosopher of Greece or Rome, the prophet of the ancient church and the lawgiver of the jews, must all yield to our divine master, and own that *they* cannot offer to their adherents any thing to be compared, in perfection or permanency, to the blessings which *HE* can bestow. "He that hath the Son, hath LIFE."

Many and important are the privileges with which faith invests the sincere believer. He is a "fellow-citizen with the saints, and of the household of God." His "faith overcometh the world." "God dwelleth in him, and he in God." But the greatest privilege, and the consummation of every other, is ETERNAL LIFE: "Now are we the sons of God, but it doth not yet appear what we shall be; but we know, that when he shall appear, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is."

On the review of these two points, on which our text turns, we may observe,

1st. That christianity doth not require a faith without evidence. The apostles preached, and the evangelists wrote, to induce men to receive the gospel. But they did not assume the airs of overbearing authority, and require

require to be believed on their mere word. They did not practise the arts of seduction, and entice men either with the words of human wisdom, and the charms of an artificial eloquence, or with the allurements of fair but delusive promises. They did not, with the passions of an enthusiast, terrify men into the reception of their doctrine, by bold denunciations of wrath and resentful threatenings. They left *these ways* of making converts for those who can derive weight and credibility from no other source.

As for *themselves*, they, fairly and ingenuously laid before the world the evidences of what they asserted. They gave a candid and impartial account of what their master taught and did. They concealed not the disgraceful circumstances of his life, nor the ignominious and painful ones of his death: but they also, fully, stated the proofs of his glorious resurrection from the dead. They did not pass over, in silence, the opposition with which their Lord met, nor the objections which were urged against him. Nor, to counterbalance the impressions, which this part of their narrative might leave, did they attempt to say every thing, which might illustrate the greatness and excellence of his character. Upon some things they slightly touch: and many more things they do not pretend to record. But they gave the world such an history as is sufficient to furnish the reader with materials, by which to form a
just

just judgment of the claims of Jesus Christ, and of the attestations from heaven with which they were supported.

Every thing in their narratives hath the appearance of naked, simple truth. On the evidence which their history carries along with it, they seek to be heard. They aim to convince the judgment and the hearts of men. Their relation is an appeal to the discernment of their readers, and exhibits the *proofs* of that faith which they invite them to embrace. Well might such writers declare, "we have no dominion over your faith." Well might they call upon their converts, as they did, to "try the spirits, and prove all things." Well may christians boast that their faith is built, not on the wisdom and word of men, but on divine evidence and proof. Christianity is founded on argument. A faith, arising from the evangelical history, is not the delusion of fancy, nor an implicit subjection to authority; but the *verdict* which the judgment giveth on the *fair hearing of a cause*. Our christian profession is a rational act, resulting from the application of the understanding to examine certain facts, and consisting in the assent we yield to honest and credible testimony.

But I hasten to another remark, 2dly. How concise is the christian creed! It is couched in few words, and comprehended in one short article; viz. believing that "Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God." The fundamen-

tal article of natural religion is this; "that God is, and that he is the rewarder of them that diligently seek him." The fundamental article of the christian religion is, that Jesus of Nazareth was the *Christ*, or *Messiah*. In the simplicity of their main principle there is, we hence see, an agreeable correspondence between both. The belief of a God, and of his rewarding justice, draws the line between atheism and religion. Faith in Jesus, as the *Christ of God*, is the grand distinction between jews, or heathens, or infidels, and christians.

But simple as is this article in itself, it is comprehensive in its influence. It is the basis on which all the sentiments, and hopes, and duties, of the believer are built. "In acknowledging Jesus to be the *Christ*, he, in fact, taketh him for his head and lord; and thereby lays himself under an obligation to receive whatever truths he can find, that Christ hath any way revealed, as well as to practise every duty which he hath enjoined*."

This one single proposition was all, which, in the first planting of the gospel, was made essential to being a christian. Succeeding ages departed from this simplicity. Afterward a man was not received as a christian, unless he subscribed to the opinion of the party which had the chief power. The christian creed was enlarged and multiplied

* Dr. Benson.

into various articles; some of which had an uncouth appearance and were expressed in very hard and unintelligible forms. More modern confessions of faith have been drawn out into a great length, divided into chapters, and each chapter has consisted of as many heads of faith as it had paragraphs. This system has its *five points*. That church hath prescribed its *Thirty-nine Articles*. How different is this from the conduct of the evangelists. John's account of what was necessary to be believed for attaining eternal life, is very concise, and brings the christian creed into a very small compass. "These are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the *Christ*, the *Messiah*, the *Son of God*; and that, believing, ye might have life through his name."

"It is to be observed, that this was said not in the first dawning of the gospel, when, perhaps, some will be apt to think less was required to be believed, than after the doctrine of faith, and mystery of salvation, were more fully explained in the epistles wrote by the apostles. For it is to be remembered, that John says this, not as soon as Christ was ascended: for these words, with the rest of his gospel, were not written till many years after, not only the other gospels, and Luke's history of the Acts; but, in all appearance, after all the epistles writ by the other apostles. So that, above threescore years after our saviour's passion, John knew nothing else required

quired to be believed for attaining of life, but that Jesus is the *Messiah*, the *Son of God* *."

Upon the declaration of this faith, and this faith alone, 'was the eunuch admitted to baptism. "The eunuch said, see, here is "water, what doth hinder me to be baptized? And Philip said, if thou believest "with all thy heart, thou mayest. And he "answered and said, I believe that Jesus "Christ is the Son of God." (Acts viii. 36. 37.) Of this faith John speaketh in this strong and expressive language in his epistle: "Whosoever shall confess that Jesus is the "Son of God, God dwelleth in him, and he "in God." "Who is he that overcometh "the world, but he that believeth that Jesus "is the Son of God."

Happy would it have been for the christian world, had it always adhered to this simplicity in its creeds! A variety of articles distracts the mind and divides the affections of men. It splits the church into parties, and draws enclosures around her communion. This *one* principle of faith, that Jesus is the *Christ*, is the bond of peace and basis of union. In proportion as christians learn to lay aside their different creeds, and to return to this apostolic creed, as altogether sufficient for the purposes of communion and salvation, the spirit of love will prevail—and the voice of truth will be heard.

* Locke's Reasonableness of Christianity, p. 165. 173f.

But I must not omit to observe,

3dly. How excellent and valuable is the history of the gospels. "These are written " that ye might believe that Jesus is the " Christ; and, that believing, ye might have " life through his name." " Some write books for their diversion, and publish them for their profit and applause; others to oblige the Athenian humour; others to instruct the world in arts and sciences, for their secular advantage. But the evangelists wrote without any view of temporal benefit to themselves, or others; but to bring men to Christ and heaven: and in order to *that*, to persuade men to believe; and for this they took the most fitting methods: they bring to the world a divine revelation, supported with its due evidence*." Upon this plain state of the merit of these books, that form the history of Christ, what books can you read, the contents of which are so excellent, or the benefit of a careful and serious perusal will be so lasting?

It is, probably, a considerable hindrance to the frequent and diligent study of these books, that men conceive they are so well acquainted with the subject already, they can scarcely expect to derive new information or entertainment from the perusal of them. But they are certainly mistaken. A repeated and attentive perusal will disclose new beau-

* The pious Mr. Henry, in loc.

ties, unfold excellencies in the character of Christ, not before observed, and open circumstances, in the narration, which will more fully convince them of its credibility. There is a fulness and depth in these memoirs, which will prevent their tiring the mind: there is a treasure of truth and knowledge in this mine, which the study of ages has not yet exhausted.

What benefit, what amusement soever other books may afford, the advantage of being conversant with this is greater than you can well conceive. By it you will be more persuaded of the divine origin of your faith; of that faith which is your solace under the trials of this world, and the ground of your noblest hope, for yourselves and friends, in the next. The fruit of this faith is holiness, and the end of it ETERNAL LIFE.

Once more, lastly, Let us reflect, how noble and sublime is the hope set before us. Men proceed far, and risk a great deal for the sake of some considerable advantage. What advantage can be greater than *that* which is proposed to engage our faith in Christ, and our practical regards to his divine character? He that believeth that Jesus is the Christ will have EVERLASTING LIFE. "I, saith the
 "divine saviour, am the RESURRECTION
 "and the LIFE. He that believeth on me,
 "though he were dead, shall live again:
 "and whosoever liveth and believeth in me,
 "shall never die."

“ The words of the apostles, which we read in the epistles, are highly valuable. Nothing that is to be met with in the human compositions of the wise and learned approacheth to them, and is to be estimated in any degree like them: but yet, even the words of the apostles will sink, and not bear a comparison with the words of our Lord, even those sacred words of ETERNAL LIFE. This is the “ pearl of great price,” that would be cheaply purchased at the expence of all that a man has, or can obtain in this world*.”

To borrow here a striking comparison from a writer who sacrificed and suffered much for religious truth. “ Any man would be deemed an ideot, who did not instantly part with a farthing, as soon as he saw only a small probability, that by so trifling a deposit he should obtain millions of pieces of gold. So no one in his right senses, who has even a slight belief that, if I may use the expression, by depositing all the advantages of this life, and even life itself, in obeying God, according to the precepts of Jesus of Nazareth, he shall secure another and an immortal life, attended with the highest and never ending felicity (as may be the case, if those things are true which are related by the sacred

* Dr. Jortin.

historians) would not immediately resolve to do it *."

Is this supposition, my christian friends, stated too strongly? Is there not, in the evidences of our faith, and in the recompence it sets before us, a just foundation for it? But, blessed be God, we are not often called to make such a sacrifice for the hope of our calling. In the general course of things, faith, in Christ, hath the promise of this life as well as of that which is to come. Can words be wanted? Need persuasions be urged? Must exhortations and entreaties be used, to engage our attention to, to excite our pursuit of, so great and noble an object as ETERNAL LIFE? Rather, without constraint, with a willing mind, let each of us, for himself, adopt the words of Peter, when "many forsook Christ" and walked no more with him." LORD, *to whom shall we go; THOU hast the words of ETERNAL LIFE?* Amen.

* *Memoirs of the Life of FAUSTUS SOCINUS*, p. 19, 20. Or SOCINUS' Argument for the Authority of the Holy Scriptures. Translated by *Combe*. p. 125. Or F. Socini Opera. Tom. I. p. 276, 277.

(information) would not immediately relate to
 the subject of my study, and I have stated
 the reasons for this. It is not the evidence
 of our work, and in the meantime it is
 known as a first foundation. But
 the God we are not often called to
 serve is a God who is not of our call.
 In the general course of things, faith,
 as of that which is to come, can well be
 wanted, but it is not to be used. Many
 expectations and desires be used to engage
 the attention to the future, but limited to
 the present and noble objects of eternal life.
 Hence, without constant, and a willing
 mind, let God be for himself, adopt the
 words of Peter, "many to look Christ
 and waited in vain with him." I can
 to know what we get, and what the reward of
 eternal life. Amen.

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